



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

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CHILDREN IN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES: LOUD AND SILENT EMERGENCIES

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 11 February 1993, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Deputy Director, Division of Public Affairs, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), briefed NGO representatives on how UNICEF attempted to use innovative approaches to provide humanitarian relief to children caught in war.

Mr. De Mistura said that the nature of current conflicts made it much more difficult to offer humanitarian relief than before. Today's conflicts were often motivated by hatred rather than the political agenda of the Cold War. In addition, nine out of ten casualties of war now were civilians, as opposed to eight per cent during World War I. Children were increasingly becoming the victims of war, and, for instance, comprised 26 per cent of the people now killed at Sarajevo. This was occurring despite the fact that 129 countries had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Mr. De Mistura said that the public expected those who were using civilians as shields to be condemned morally and to make it difficult for them to continue. New approaches, such as those often used by NGOs, were needed to enable humanitarian relief to reach all civilians in need.

There were two kinds of emergencies: "Loud emergencies" could either be man-made or natural, and normally received more public attention than "silent emergencies". Man-made disasters, such as the war in Lebanon, often lasted much longer than natural disasters. An example of a silent emergency was the 253,000 children around the world dying each week from such preventable illnesses as pneumonia, diarrhoea, and measles. The amount of money needed to stop this tragedy was US\$25 billion, or the yearly amount spent by Europeans on beer.

CASE STUDY 1

The 1991 siege of Dubrovnik: public attention helped save lives

In November 1991, Dubrovnik, in the former Yugoslavia, was under siege and its 60,000 citizens had no water, electricity or food. UNICEF officials obtained the permission of the disputing factions to assist the children. UNICEF subsequently sent a hydrofoil to the city, accompanied by two ministers from two European countries. Mr. De Mistura observed that being psychologically besieged--by alienation, loss of hope, and isolation--was as tragic as being physically besieged. The hydrofoil did not carry food or anything else of strategic importance, yet its mere presence provided hope to a demoralized population. More important, however, the ministers obtained the support of their respective countries and the attention of the

media. As a result, ships with 3,000 tons of medical supplies and food were sent, and 6,200 children were evacuated. The siege of Dubrovnik ended on 8 December.

CASE STUDY 2

Earning the trust of Afghanistan's war-torn population

Mr. De Mistura used another approach in Herat, Afghanistan. In 1989, half the city had been destroyed in the war, and control of the rest was being contested. The mission of the United Nations was to help reconstruct the city and provide water, sanitation and food. Permission was obtained from all the factions to provide relief. Just before entering Herat, however, Mr. De Mistura was warned that children in teams of three walked in the streets, throwing hand grenades at Soviet soldiers, as their only experience with foreigners had been with the Soviet military. In addition, instead of using the traditional approach of visiting the city's officials, the United Nations team went immediately to the fruit market, where the population gathered. Using a loudspeaker, they started to 'sell' their mission directly to the local people. As a result, the people understood they were different from the Soviet soldiers and allowed them to continue the peaceful mission without any aggression.

War and psychological trauma: the "silent horror"

Mr. De Mistura said that according to UNICEF estimates, some ten million children today suffered from the "silent horror". Although not physically wounded, these children had suffered profound psychological trauma as a result of seeing the death and destruction caused by war. Mr. De Mistura noted that even United Nations peace-keeping troops were rotated. Hence, it was important for the international community to provide the same--if not greater--attention to children caught in war.